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Citation for published version:

Gorringe, H, Jeffery, R & Sariola, S 2009, 'Ethnographic Insights into Enduring Inequalities', *Journal of south asian development*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097317410900400101>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/097317410900400101](https://doi.org/10.1177/097317410900400101)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of south asian development

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Gorringe, H., Jeffery, R., & Sariola, S. (2009). Ethnographic Insights into Enduring Inequalities. *Journal of south asian development*, 4(1), 16. [10.1177/097317410900400101](https://doi.org/10.1177/097317410900400101)

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Ethnographic Insights into Enduring Inequalities

Hugo Gorringer, Roger Jeffery & Salla Sariola

This is a country where the poor fear tuberculosis, which kills 1,000 Indians a day, but people like me - middle-class people with access to health services that are probably better than England's - don't fear it at all. It's an unglamorous disease, like so much of the things that the poor of India endure (Adiga in Jefferies 2008).

The juxtaposition of 'India Shining' and 'The Republic of Hunger' is something of a cliché, like the pictures once popular in Western magazines highlighting poverty on the streets of booming Bombay. But the contrasts, as Booker Prize winner Aravind Adiga comments, are still striking: India is seen as one of the emerging global economic powers, and experienced growth in per capita Gross Domestic Product at 2.4 per cent per annum through the 1990s (Soubbotina 2004: Ch 4), but these relatively impressive economic growth rates (at least compared to India's previous record) coexist with poor human development indicators and rising inequality in terms of consumption expenditure (Dev and Ravi: 2007: 519). In South Asia, only Sri Lanka is in the top 100 countries ranked by HDI (at 93 in 2006) while India is number 126 of the 170 countries ranked. Attempts to link India to China are increasingly strained: China grew by an unprecedented 6.4 percent a year in the 1990s, and managed to rank 81 in terms of HDI. By contrast, India's human development index is much lower than would be predicted from its per capita GDP (http://hdr.undp.org/external/flash/hdi_gdp/).

While discussions of the threats to India's future economic growth, and analyses of the causes of its poor human development record, are common, we know less about the social mechanisms deployed to cope with the increasingly disarticulated economic processes. India's

growth is (in comparative terms) remarkably 'jobless': its formal sector employment opportunities are stagnant, exactly when large numbers of educated young people are entering the workforce. Regional, community, class and caste inequalities seem to be growing rather than declining. What are the social and political implications of these processes? The influential annual Human Development Report for South Asia argues that:

High and persistent inequality in the region is not only restricting the poor to benefit from economic growth but also, by fuelling civil and political conflicts, is posing a serious threat to the process of growth itself (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2007: 63).

The failings of state institutions and welfare systems to deal with these kinds of issues are increasingly highlighted (Subramaniam & Harriss-White 1999), despite the reforms instituted since 2004, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Less attention, however, is paid to the micro politics of everyday interaction through which such institutions are instantiated, administered or subverted. Fewer studies still examine how negotiation, struggle and action are employed by those seeking access to such institutions: nor give attention to more general processes that create marginalisation for some as intended or unintended consequences of processes of inclusion for others.

The normative nature of studies of inequality and social exclusion can foster a focus on issues that we find morally unacceptable, and create a concomitant tendency to 'romanticize resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990). But the relationships between poverty and economic inequality on the one hand, and civil and political conflicts on the other, are not straightforward, and certainly do not always lead to social mobilisation. Which are the most visible signs of inequality to the urban or rural poor: SUVs on the streets of the metropolitan cities, advertisements for foreign holidays, or super-speciality hospitals and English-medium

schools that might as well have explicit signs forbidding the poor from even dreaming of getting access? In what circumstances is increasing inequality manifested in rising social unrest? What mechanisms mitigate or accelerate such processes? How important are, for example, protest movements or non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and their social welfare programmes, in highlighting or justifying the inequalities that affect people on a day-to-day basis? And what political processes articulate people's responses to inequality and marginalisation? A sophisticated review of the particular forms of South Asian democracy by Lokniti, based at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, notes, for example, that freedom from want and from fear is barely being addressed by the existing political institutions. On fear, it concludes:

Though people routinely live unsafe lives, the overall levels of felt insecurity are not as high as would be expected. The promise of freedom from fear has been realised only for a small minority and things are not getting better for a large number of people. They may get worse if the gap between the kind of security that people want (law and order, personal and physical security) and what the state and its expert policy-makers focus on providing (state boundaries, inter-state conflict, terrorism and insurgency) is not bridged (Lokniti: Programme for Comparative Democracy 2006: ch. 8).

These conclusions suggest that there are major gaps between the felt needs of the mass of the population in south Asia – for adequate health services, schooling, nutritional support, employment, and everyday security – and government action. Furthermore, when people make the kinds of demands that are clearly logged in the Lokniti report, and receive almost nothing in return, the state faces clear problems of representation: how do both civil society *and* political society (Chatterjee 2004) cope with the evidence of growing inequalities and state failures? And although evidence of dispute, conflict and resentment is ubiquitous, it is remarkable how the pervasiveness of peaceful rather than violent protest and of hard work

rather than ballooning criminality, might lead the casual observer to think that the dense ties of sociality can cushion India from the worst results of the twin experiences of affluence and deprivation. At issue here are questions of how such inequalities are normalised, rendered banal or subject to daily coping mechanisms in ways that forestall mass unrest.

It is all too easy to focus on macro-economic indicators or the failings of the 'state' as though either the state or the economy were unitary entities that operated in a separate sphere from the everyday lives of citizens. Both are complex constellations that may mitigate inequalities on one level and reinforce them elsewhere. State actions and categories, thus, may shape people's identities and understandings of the world and simultaneously inspire and contain forms of protest and mobilisation – as when Adivasi groups mobilise around the unifying category of Scheduled Tribe but end up reinforcing their marginalisation (Steur, this volume). We must, therefore, problematise the very concept of inequality and ask the critical questions of 'equality of what and for whom' (Sen 1992)?

The South Asia Anthropologists Group [SAAG] conference on which this volume is based, held at the Centre for South Asian Studies in the University of Edinburgh in September 2007, thus considered the contribution of ethnographic approaches to the study of various forms of inequality. We encouraged ethnographic analyses that focussed on a broader conceptualisation of inequality than is often considered, one that encompasses social, cultural and political domains, including the continuing struggle of homosexual men and women for recognition and parity; Adivasi and Dalit demands for respect and resources; the shifting patterns of age-related discrimination; and continuing debates over religious nationalism and conversion – as well as the more prevalent attention given to caste, class and gender inequalities. In order to understand the shifting contours of marginality in South Asia, we endeavoured to avoid the tendency to either romanticise the struggles of the poor or to vilify macro-actors like the state. Instead, we asked how marginalised groups may act within the field of power to challenge,

overcome and reproduce their own marginality, as well as exploring the means by which such exclusion is reinforced or questioned by others.

The papers presented here represent a diverse and fascinating sample of the issues that were addressed in the conference.ⁱ The workshop stimulated considerable debate, both about the nature of inequalities and the processes by which they can fruitfully be studied.

Given the scale, complexity and extent of power asymmetries and inequalities in South Asia, some conference participants asked, what is the point of studies that use ethnographic methods? We contend that, as with all qualitative studies, they have value in their own right (for example, by providing ways – however imperfect and fractured – of giving voice to some of those otherwise overlooked). They also usefully complement studies that provide overviews and generalisations by offering deeper insights and alternative perspectives. We are not purists, for whom epistemology provides reasons to think only within one methodological box (Lincoln & Guba 2000; Maxwell & Delaney 2004; Schwandt 2000). Rather, we see ethnographic studies as providing richly textured accounts of the processes and mechanisms that underpin the production and reproduction of inequality in South Asia – accounts that can generate hypotheses to be tested in other ways, as well as generalisations about how people's perceptions and understandings feed into social change of various kinds (Flyvbjerg 2004).

The issues raised in the papers are too broad to cover fully in this short introduction but we will highlight some of the key themes and contributions. The first relates to the question 'equality of what?' Statistical accounts of inequality and development focus overwhelmingly on issues of income, education and access to healthcare. What such accounts lack, is any sense of how these issues are received and perceived by people on the ground. It is mistaken 'to think that the poor perceive deprivation only, or even mainly, in terms of material conditions' (Oommen 1990: 57). As Still and Steur's papers on Dalits and Adivasis evince, the intangible

benefits of honour, dignity and self-esteem are every bit as significant as material circumstances in determining people's sense of well-being. Economic or educational advancement, thus, may fuel rather than diminish anger over a perceived lack of respect.

These studies also point to the cumulative nature of inequalities and, in demonstrating how upwardly mobile men for example may effect a downward displacement of onerous tasks and forms of submission onto women, raise the question of 'equality for whom'? Ethnographic methodologies, in other words, tease apart the hidden assumptions and preconceptions that are embedded in the abstract categories of caste and tribe. They challenge us to confront the politics of category formation, identity-building and of particular modes of political expression.

Why, for instance, are Dalit or tribal women represented by Dalit or Adivasi rather than women's movements? How is it that some kinds of poor women are more easily included in the 'deserving poor' than others, as Govinda reminds us? Her paper, and those by Sariola and Wilson compel us to ask 'who benefits', from particular forms of social intervention.

Understanding the micro-politics of mobilisation offers insights into how even well meaning and 'progressive' institutions, organisations and movements may be caught up in relationships that reproduce inequalities.

Ethnographic studies also emphasise the salience of state categorisations, showing how they are created, inhabited and lived out. Sariola, thus, points to the material effects of the social construction of 'sex-workers' as an epidemiological category. Govinda and Heitmeyer further illustrate the power of such categories in showing how most social welfare programmes in India have assumed that the social categories needing favourable treatment are the Dalits and Adivasis even though many Muslims are equally vulnerable.

Both these studies, as well as those by Still and Steur, emphasise the significance of institutional practices in the (often unintended) creation or reproduction of inequalities.

Sariola and Govinda also point out how institutional procedures – such as the use of quotas or a tick-box approach to community management – can serve to forge or accentuate divisions within and between groups. Similarly, Wilson demonstrates how the particular forms of globalised health care to be found in India are acting strongly – perhaps even decisively – to accentuate and deepen the existing inequalities in life chances.

One recurrent theme in the conference was the contribution of ethnographic fieldwork to the study of global processes, phenomena and subjectivities. Globalisation is often ‘presented as a totalizing economic and cultural phenomenon’ (Harcourt 2002: 291) and, indeed, local ethnographies invariably point to wider structures, relationships and discourses. The papers, here, however, show how global processes are mediated at the local level. They reveal how global processes are reshaping social dynamics – through the importation of NGO strategies (Govinda, Sariola), the rise of health tourism (Wilson), the direct and indirect spread of ideas and political strategies (Still, Heitmeyer), and the circumscribing of local economic possibilities (Steur) for instance – but also emphasise the ways in which globalisation is negotiated. In avoiding the sweeping generalisations that attend some studies of global processes the studies here suggest that the global and local are mutually constitutive and that ‘local specificity and global construction are intertwined’ (Harcourt 2002: 291).

Three final points. The first relates to the India-centric nature of the papers presented here. Whilst all the papers focus on specific examples of social processes in contemporary India, we nevertheless feel strongly that they have a wider resonance and relevance especially within South Asia, not least because they cover a diversity of states and forms of inequality within India. We hope, therefore, that they will be read accordingly and inspire similar projects and analyses across a broader area. Secondly, the focus on inequality is, we think, justified by the magnitude of issues confronting people across South Asia but should not blind us to parallel processes of ‘equalisation’ some of which are evident in the papers presented here. We

contend that the two should not be conceived as opposing tendencies, since equalisation in some spheres may entail the creation of inequities elsewhere. Our intent, rather, is to examine the mechanisms underpinning various forms of social change.

Finally, no volume on inequality would be complete without a reflection on the implications and recommendations of the research. Here too we must scrutinise the contributions of ethnography and ask what we can offer beyond a vulture-like concern with poverty and exclusion. Not all of the papers explicitly address implications, but the fine-grained analyses of social processes do offer us a point of departure for policy decisions. Most of all, we trust that this volume will spark debate and critical scrutiny of both inequalities and proposed means of addressing them.

Acknowledgements: We are indebted to the conference participants for stimulating these thoughts. Thanks also to Luisa Steur for detailed comments and to the journal editor for endless patience and encouragement.

ⁱ For more details, see <http://www.csas.ed.ac.uk/saagMarch.php?menu=3>.

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